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Chaplains and RPs Provide a Positive and Powerful Impact at NMCSD

BY VJOHNSON – JANUARY 17, 2014

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Cmdr. Robert A. Spencer, Naval Medical Center San Diego (NMCSD) Roman Catholic Chaplain, delivers a prayer during Catholic Mass at the NMCSD Chapel. The Navy chaplains, alongside the religious program specialists, make up a ministry team that offers spiritual support to the hospital's staff and beneficiaries. (Photo by Mass Communication Specialist 2nd Class Zachary Bell)

Story by Mass Communication Specialist 3rd Class Justin Galvin

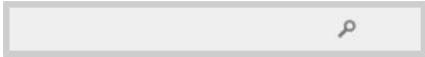
Naval Medical Center San Diego Public Affairs

At Naval Medical Center San Diego (NMCSD) the jobs of active duty, reserve and civilian chaplains, as well as religious program specialists (RP) take on duties and responsibilities that have a lasting impact on the lives of hospital staff and beneficiaries.

Hospital chaplains and RPs have a unique culture all their own. The chaplains must be able to instantly adapt to effectively deliver ministry in a variety of environments, including caring for an outpatient in a clinic, standing by the bed of an inpatient in the Intensive Care Unit, listening to a grieving family member in the emergency department, or celebrating the birth of a child.

"To be a competent and effective hospital chaplain is not easy. It requires a set of skills and training that goes way beyond what is expected of a chaplain serving in other billets. It is a job that is not for the faint of heart," said Lt. Matthew Olson, a staff chaplain at NMCSD. "On a regular basis we encounter death, dying, suffering and pain. At times it can be overwhelming, but I try to remember that when I walk into a room I bring the gifts of compassion, mercy and grace. When I leave, I often take out of the room with me the patients despair, loneliness, fear, and hopelessness."

Chaplains in a hospital environment are equipped to meet a unique range of ministry opportunities. According to NMCSD's Command Chaplain Capt. John Denton, the work of chaplains in Navy medicine is focused on both



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patients and staff members.

“Chaplains address spiritual and religious matters, the spiritual being something that we all can connect with,” says Denton. “In both of these communities (we are) simultaneously helping with the healing process of patients while vigilantly supporting and tending to the needs of the staff.”

RPs do not provide direct pastoral counseling on board NMCSD, but share some of these duties by taking care of the day-to-day operations within the hospital's chapel. RPs support chaplains of all denominations by maintaining records, ecclesiastical (religious) documents, and liaise with religious and community agencies. They also set up for services, perform administrative, clerical and secretarial duties, as well as publicizing the command's religious program activities.

Additionally, RPs like NMCSD's Religious Program Specialist 3rd Class Maria M. Ruiz, act as a direct link to active duty staff members and patient beneficiaries to the chaplains by providing information on service times within the chapel. Being there for people is a part of daily life for Ruiz.



Naval Medical Center San Diego's (NMCSD) Religious Program Specialist (RP) Seaman Recruit Kenneth G. Riddick lights a candle in preparation for a religious service at NMCSD's Chapel. The RPs, alongside the Navy chaplains, make up a ministry team that offers spiritual support to the hospital's staff and beneficiaries. (Photo by Mass Communication Specialist 3rd Class Justin W. Galvin)

“I get my motivation from my fellow Sailors and Wounded Warriors that I meet here,” said Ruiz.

Ruiz is involved in various clubs and associations at NMCSD, which puts her in contact with many of the staff members and beneficiaries. These extracurricular activities, such as the Junior Enlisted Association and command color guard, offer Ruiz the chance to meet a variety of individuals.

In 2013 alone, NMCSD chaplains had more than 13,000 inpatient visits, 2,400 outpatient visits and preformed nearly 800 sacramental acts. They also handled more than 1,200 counseling cases. NMCSD is proud to offer a Catholic mass service noon Monday through Friday and a Protestant service on Sundays at 9:30 a.m. all held at the base chapel. The base chapel also has a sanctuary set aside for all faiths to use. Staff and beneficiaries are welcome to talk and receive confidential counseling on a walk-in or appointment basis.

For more information on the Navy Chaplain Corps, visit www.chaplain.navy.mil and www.navy.mil/local/crb/.

For more information on Naval Medical Center San Diego, visit www.med.navy.mil/sites/nmcscd, www.facebook.com/nmcscd, or www.twitter.com/NMC_SD.



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